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<p>In September 1944, the two leaders of the western alliance met at Quebec for the second time, the 'Octagon' conference. A major item on the agenda was British naval participation in the war against Japan. At 'Octagon' these matters were to be decided, and decided they were. At the first plenary session, Churchill offered the services of a British fleet 'in the main operations against Japan.' Roosevelt replied that the British fleet was 'no sooner offered than accepted.' And that was how the British fleet came to play a part in the war against Japan. Today, the British Pacific Fleet is most remembered for its service during the Okinawa campaign. Unlike their American counterparts, British aircraft carriers, with their armoured flight decks, withstood kamikazes as they held the Allied flank closest to Formosa.</p> <p>Presented at the Pacific Coast Conference on British Studies, 25-27 March 1988, Lake Arrowhead, CA.</p>			
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WINSTON CHURCHILL AND THE THIRD FRONT¹

1. 'Muddle and Mismanagement'

In September 1944, the two leaders of the western alliance met at Quebec for the second time, the 'Octagon' conference. A major item on the agenda was British naval participation in the war against Japan. At 'Octagon' these matters were to be decided, and decided they were. At the first plenary session, Churchill offered the services of a British fleet 'in the main operations against Japan.' Roosevelt replied that the British fleet was 'no sooner offered than accepted.' And that was how the British fleet came to play a part in the war against Japan. Today, the British Pacific Fleet is most remembered for its service during the Okinawa campaign. Unlike their American counterparts, British aircraft carriers, with their armoured flight decks, withstood kamikazes as they held the Allied flank closest to Formosa.

This paper addresses the question of how this British Pacific Fleet came to be, especially the role of Winston Churchill in the war against Japan. At the time, British conduct of the war provoked despairing comment from many who played a central part. General Sir Hastings Ismay, who served as secretary to the Chiefs of Staff and Defence Committees that directed wartime strategy, wrote to Pownall in May 1944: 'I believe that the waffling that there has been for nearly nine months over the basic question of our strategy in the Far East will be one of the black spots in the record of British Higher Direction of War...' The head of the Joint Intelligence Committee,

Victor Cavendish-Bentinck, minuted in the summer of 1944: 'I do not think that when the history of the discussions on our Far Eastern strategy which have taken place during the past year come to be written it will be found very edifying.' General Sir Henry Pownall, who served as deputy chief of staff to Lord Louis Mountbatten in South-East Asia Command (SEAC) wrote: '...from first to last there has been muddle and mismanagement, largely because of lack of understanding of the problems involved and disinclination to tackle them squarely...' 2

In 1957, Trumbull Higgins published Winston Churchill and the Second Front, an attack on Churchill for delaying the second front. His book ignited a debate that continues today. Higgins accused Churchill during in the critical year of 1942 of dragging his feet and needlessly prolonging the war by concentrating resources on peripheral goals in the Mediterranean rather than the main objective: Germany. Fear of casualties diverted the British war effort away from the areas in which it would have been most effective and led the British to pursue such pseudo-Second Fronts as strategic bombing and the protracted and costly campaign up the Italian peninsula.

This paper borrows more than its title from Higgins's book and seeks to establish that the indictment drawn by Higgins 30 years ago is more true of Churchill's conduct of the war against Japan, the third front, than of that in the Mediterranean. After the Italian surrender in September 1943, the British had substantial naval resources at hand to employ in the Pacific, the one theatre in which British surface warships could still effectively contribute. Yet not

until the spring of 1945 was that naval strength employed. Some accounts would have it that the American CNO, Admiral Ernest King, an Anglophobe acting out of narrow service loyalties, prevented the British Navy from playing its rightful part in the Pacific War.

Samuel Eliot Morison stated unequivocally, 'Admiral King wished the Royal Navy to operate eastward from the Indian Ocean, recapture Singapore and help puncture the bloated Japanese Empire from the south. This concept was pleasing neither to Churchill nor to the First Sea Lord [Admiral of the Fleet Sir Andrew Cunningham]. They wished the Royal Navy to get into the thick of the fighting alongside the United States Navy as it approached the Japanese home islands.'³ Morison was right only about Cunningham. About Churchill, he was completely mistaken. Throughout 1943 and the first nine months of 1944, Churchill opposed sending a British fleet anywhere in the Pacific. His service advisers, however, rejected his alternative, an amphibious attack on Sumatra, Operation 'Culverin.' Not until the summer of 1944 were the British able to agree on a strategy for the Pacific War. As a result, not until the final months of the Pacific War was a British fleet engaged in the 'main operations against Japan.'

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People today may remember 'Culverin' as a pet project of Churchill's, intended to recapture Singapore ahead of the peace conference, so as to restore the prestige of the British Empire in the East. But this goal was only one facet of a complex and involved battle that Churchill waged throughout early 1944 and which nearly led



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to the resignations of the three British Service Chiefs on the eve of the Normandy invasion. 'Culverin' deserves more attention because it was the alternative to British naval operations in either the Central Pacific or the South-West Pacific. Churchill favoured 'Culverin' not out of whimsy but precisely because it precluded a major ground campaign in Burma. The British Chiefs of Staff, Cunningham most of all, opposed him bitterly. In the end, they won and Churchill lost.

2. Uncertain Covenants

At the Casablanca Conference in January 1943, Churchill and the British chiefs of staff committed themselves to an amphibious operation against the Arakan coast across the Bay of Bengal in the 1943-1944 winter campaigning season. This endeavour was part of the 'Anakim' operation that the Indian C-in-C, Field-Marshal Wavell had drafted. 'Anakim' envisaged a co-ordinated ground offensive in northern Burma and an amphibious landing on the Arakan coast. Scarcely had the conference concluded in mutual expressions of friendship and confidence than a sober look at British resources and the collapse of the first Arakan campaign led Churchill to write to Roosevelt cancelling nearly all the engagements so lightly entered into.

Following that embarrassing retraction, British strategists began to investigate alternatives to uphold their commitments in the war against Japan. In March 1943, the Joint Planners postulated two ways for Britain to fulfill her Casablanca pledge: an offensive from India, i.e., 'Anakim,' or the transfer of naval forces to the South-West

Pacific. Another Arakan campaign offered little promise, given the weaknesses that the Indian Army had displayed so recently. By contrast, a British fleet in the South-West Pacific could achieve major strategic objectives by severing Japanese sea lanes to the Empire's oil-rich Southern Resources Area or by attacking the sources of oil themselves in Sumatra, Borneo, and Java. But at this stage of the war, the naval option had to await the defeat of Italy and the removal of the still sizeable Italian Navy.⁴

Failing that, the planners thought that the next easiest way to disrupt Japanese oil supplies was a surprise amphibious landing on northern Sumatra to seize its airfields and to capture the important oilfield of Pangkalan Brandan. Herein lay the strategic rationale for the southern portion of 'Anakim,' or Operation 'Culverin,' as it came to be known in the summer of 1943. The Chiefs of Staff discussed these recommendations in late April and agreed that the most promising alternative to 'Anakim' was the landing on northern Sumatra. It would surprise the Japanese, since preparations could be veiled by simultaneous preparations for an offensive against Burma. Strategically, taking northern Sumatra would open the way for 'an immediate descent on Penang,' which could lead to the reconquest of Malaya and thereby expose all Japan's oilfields in the Southern Area.⁵

These proposals gained a sympathetic hearing from Churchill, who strongly opposed a land campaign in Burma. A lifelong believer in amphibious operations, Churchill needed little persuasion. Writing in 1923, he expounded the philosophy he applied to these later events:

Nearly all the battles which are regarded as masterpieces of the military art...have been battles of manoeuvre in which very often the enemy has found himself defeated by some novel expedient or device, some queer, swift, unexpected thrust or strategy. In many such battles the losses of the victor have been small....The success of amphibious descents or invasions depends upon whether forces superior to the defender can be carried to the spot in time, and whether these can be continually reinforced more quickly than the enemy. In this the defenders are at a grave disadvantage. Even after the expedition has put to sea, no one can tell for certain where the descent will be made. Although the Continent Powers were working on interior lines, this advantage did not countervail the superior mobility of sea power.⁶

Churchill scorned Wavell's plans with their simultaneous ground offensive in northern Burma and amphibious assault on the port of Akyab and Ramree Island on the Arakan Coast. Fighting a protracted land campaign in the Burmese jungle was like 'going into the water to fight a shark.' Early in 1943, with Italy still very much a belligerent, there were no available British warships for the Eastern Fleet, which would have to support and supply the invading British forces within easy range of Japanese shore-based aircraft and against

whom the Japanese could concentrate their own sizeable navy. Early on the voyage to America for the 'Trident' conference (Second Washington), Churchill penned a lengthy paper on strategy against Japan, which his colleagues accepted as a basis for discussions with the Americans. His arguments bear quoting in extenso:

Can we not seize in the A.B.D.A. area some strategic point or points which will force the Japanese to counter-attack under conditions detrimental to them and favourable to us?....It should be possible to carry up to 30,000 or 40,000 men across the Bay of Bengal...to one or more points of the crescent from India to the Philippines. This crescent would include: (i) the Andaman Islands; (ii) Mergui, with Bangkok as objective; (iii) the Kra Isthmus; (iv) assault of Northern Sumatra; (v) the southern tip of Sumatra; (vi) Java....The seizure of even one key point intolerable to the enemy would impose upon him not only operations to recapture it, but a dispersion of his forces over the immense coastline exposed to the menace of sea-power. Nothing less than a definite attack on some point will enforce this dispersion. Otherwise the enemy rests at his ease....⁷

In the 20 years since he wrote The World Crisis, Churchill's thinking had changed little. Warming to the subject, he told the

'Trident' conference (12-25 May) that such an attack would be an 'Asiatic "Torch."' However, the proposal encountered stiff opposition from Admiral King, who relentlessly bore down on Churchill's logic. Direct attacks alone would bring the Japanese fleet to a decisive action. Moreover, King warned, Japan could resume the offensive at any time, and for the present the Allies needed to maintain unrelenting pressure, striking at Japanese communications, not at the periphery of the 'Southern Resources Area.' An attack such as Churchill proposed was a frontal attack on a secondary object, costly and ineffective. The weak point of Churchill's proposal was that he could not explain, if British naval forces in the Indian Ocean could not support either the Akyab or Ramree ventures, how the same forces could sustain combined operations against Malaya, Sumatra, or Java. But 'Trident' was not the last time that Churchill proposed ambitious amphibious operations with forces deemed inadequate for lesser projects.

The Allies compromised at 'Trident.' They sketched a joint strategy involving three converging advances on Hong Kong, each catering to one key Allied decision maker in the Pacific war. The American thrust across the Central Pacific was the strategy of the U.S. Navy; the American thrust through the South Pacific was that of Douglas MacArthur, and the approved British role was now to advance through the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea. Beforehand, however, the United States insisted, the British would recapture Burma.⁸ Thus, in terms of immediate operations, the conference reaffirmed the Casablanca promise that the British plan of campaign

for Burma would include limited amphibious landings on Ramree and Akyab by December 1943.

Before proceeding further into inter-Allied decisionmaking, we need to take into account a purely British question that arose during the summer of 1943 following 'Trident'--the over-expansion of the Indian Army. In May, the Cabinet first heard of the Indian National Army. The India Secretary, Leo Amery, warned that attempts to foment disaffection in the Indian Army had been made easier by less selective wartime recruitment, both of Indian other ranks and of British emergency commissioned officers, who did not speak the language of their men. Amery advised strongly against any further expansion of the Army, which by 1943 had grown from its prewar 180,000 men to nearly two million.⁹ What followed is best described by Wavell:

The Prime Minister, however, chose to read into Amery's note the impression that the Indian Army was liable to rise at any moment; and he accused me of creating a Frankenstein by putting modern weapons in the hands of sepoy, spoke of 1857, and was really almost childish about it. I tried to re-assure him...but he has a curious complex about India and is always loath to hear good of it and apt to believe the worst. He has still at heart his cavalry subaltern's idea of India; just as his military tactics are inclined to date from the Boer War.¹⁰

The Boer War had few lessons to teach regarding amphibious warfare, but Churchill did fancy himself a student of 18th century and Napoleonic warfare, at least those campaigns documenting the 'British Way in War,' counter-examples to the waste of the Somme and Flanders. To his mind, the Burma campaign resembled nothing so much as the Western Front of World War One. As a practising politician, Churchill also knew the political risks of sanguinary land campaigns. These risks were doubled in the political circumstances of wartime India and with an Indian Army recruited less carefully than in peacetime. Churchill feared for the effectiveness and thus the loyalty of the 'Native Army' (as he persisted in calling it) in the event of heavy casualties. Recruited increasingly in wartime from the 'non-martial' races most susceptible to nationalist appeals, the Indian Army might thus threaten the Raj on whose behalf it was fighting. But if the Indian Army kept to less costly amphibious operations, then it would remain an effective and loyal force.

Churchill revived the idea of a landing on Sumatra at the 'Quadrant' conference at Quebec in August 1943. At this time, Churchill did not see 'Culverin' as a means of recovering Singapore, a prospect he characterized as 'labouring through jungles and hundreds of miles of difficult country...in order to attack the enemy at his strongest point. It is more probable that Singapore will be recovered at the peace table than during the war.'¹¹ Although he changed his mind later, Churchill envisaged the attack on Sumatra as taking place almost immediately--in the autumn of 1943--and as no more than a

lightning descent with limited forces on Sabang. By sheer audacity, the operation was to overwhelm the Japanese garrison. The necessary troops, he was convinced, were already in the theatre and could readily be diverted from the planned amphibious attack on the heavily fortified island of Ramree, a project of which he remained sceptical. He was convinced that landing craft could be brought east from the Mediterranean and then returned to Europe for the invasion of France in the summer of 1944.

At the same time as he revived 'Culverin,' Churchill for ever suspicious of the Government of India and of Indian Army Headquarters, helped establish an inter-Allied South-East Asia Command (SEAC) to replace the overburdened Indian command structure. The new Supreme Allied Commander was Lord Louis Mountbatten, previously Chief of Combined Operations. The ostensible reason for Mountbatten's appointment was to separate the administration of the war effort in India from the command function. But Mountbatten, with his background in amphibious warfare, was also ideal to organize the landing on Sumatra.

Following their return from Quebec, the British COS again looked into 'Culverin,' especially the claim that it could be mounted with only the resources allotted for the attack on Akyab. They concluded that Mountbatten could not readily carry out large-scale amphibious operations in SEAC until perhaps six months after the collapse of Germany. Accordingly, they preferred a sequence of limited amphibious attacks on either Akyab or Ramree, leading to Rangoon.

Even the staff at SEAC developed doubts. Mountbatten's Deputy Chief of Staff, Major-General Sir Henry Pownall noted that: 'Winston has compared northern Sumatra to the Dardanelles, and did so proudly. The analogy may well be correct. A tempting objective that glittered so brightly that it was attempted without adequate resources, and therefore failed. In fact a typical Winston project.'¹² In the end, the three British commanders in SEAC killed Churchill's idea of a limited 'Culverin' for the 1943-1944 campaigning season. The shopping list for landing craft alone amounted to 37 assault vessels in addition to 375 landing craft. In late October 1943, their diversion from Europe would have jeopardized 'Overlord,' as well as the Allied landings at Anzio and in southern France. Further staff studies done at SEAC also destroyed one of Churchill's pet assumptions--that 'Culverin' could be mounted at any time irrespective of the monsoon. In reality, the monsoon produced sea states that made amphibious operations intolerably risky from May through September.¹³ Doing 'Culverin' would also require withdrawing all British escort carriers from trade protection early in 1944. Escorts, likewise, would come at the expense of the Atlantic and Mediterranean.

Therefore, 'Culverin' depended on substantial American aid and therefore upon American approval. But the American JCS disliked 'Culverin,' since it did nothing to relieve pressure on the Chinese. Now, SEAC was under strong informal American pressure to mount some sort of combined operation, to fulfill the Casablanca and 'Trident' promises, so Churchill hoped for American material assistance. But American planners remained sceptical of British intentions,

principally on account of the slow buildup of British naval forces in the Indian Ocean after the fall of Italy and the caution of Admiral Sir James Somerville, C-in-C of the Eastern Fleet.¹⁴ As a result, SEAC planners returned to a still more limited combined operation, this time against the Andaman Islands, Operation 'Buccaneer.' To be launched in tandem with a Chinese-British land offensive, 'Buccaneer' would prevent the Japanese in Burma from reinforcing themselves via the waters of coastal Burma and the Irrawaddy. For this reason, the Americans supported it and indeed pressed for. The American JCS made it plain at the outset of the meetings that they could not spare shipping for 'Culverin' but that they did favour 'Buccaneer.' As one American background paper put it unkindly in early November 1943, 'Buccaneer' was the 'first definite amphibious commitment in this area which the British have been willing to undertake.'¹⁵

Roosevelt, Churchill, and their service chiefs and planning staffs debated these matters at Cairo during the 'Sextant' conference that ran from late November to mid-December 1943, being punctuated by the first meeting of the Allied 'Big Three' at Teheran. The 'Sextant' discussions turned largely on South-East Asia, inspired by the presence at the first session of Chiang Kai-shek. Churchill had promised Chiang that a reinforced Eastern Fleet would enable the British to launch amphibious operations in tandem with their ground offensive in northern Burma during the 1943-1944 campaigning season. Now, with Roosevelt smiling agreement, Chiang tried to redeem the pledge.

However, Churchill attempted late in November to back out of the Andamans venture just as he had earlier gone back on the promises entered into at Casablanca. Writing to General Harold Ismay, the secretary of the COS Committee, Churchill claimed that he had 'never been consulted upon it ['Buccaneer']'.¹⁶ Strictly speaking, he had not known all its details, but he had agreed at Casablanca 11 months earlier to mount Operation 'Anakim,' an even larger affair. 'Anakim' had always included an amphibious component, and the Andamans project grew from the prior commitment. His promise at Casablanca had been successively whittled down to two, then one combined operation.

The reasons for Churchill's reluctance to mount 'Buccaneer' were twofold. In the first place, 'Buccaneer' entailed a British ground offensive in Burma, something against which Churchill had set his face. The British in general attached little worth to Chinese units, so Chiang's threats not to fight were hollow bluster. The second reason for Churchill's opposition to 'Buccaneer' stemmed from his ambitions in the Mediterranean. With Italy defeated, Churchill sought in the autumn of 1943 to entice Turkey into the war. Rather than drawing landing craft from the Mediterranean, he wanted sufficient craft on hand to capture the Dodecanese, which had fallen into German hands with the collapse of Mussolini. Seizing these islands would make the Turkish decision easier, thereby gaining a continental ally who could be supported by British seapower. Accordingly, Churchill tried to get the Americans to postpone 'Overlord,' the invasion of northern France then planned for May 1944, but his Allies clung to the agreed upon date and perversely insisted on 'Anvil' (Southern France)

and 'Buccaneer,' too. Churchill made no headway with his Mediterranean projects.

While the two leaders and their military advisers were hearing these words in Teheran, Mountbatten had time to draw up a detailed estimate of the requirements for 'Buccaneer.' He presented them at the second session of the Cairo Conference that convened after Teheran. Mountbatten's commanders shared the same reluctance to incur heavy losses. Seldom spoken of directly, there was concern at the effect on Indian Army morale should it meet with a substantial reverse. Therefore, to take the Andamans, the SEAC service commanders projected a need to lift 50,000 men in order to defeat the Japanese garrison of 4,000. As projected, 'Buccaneer' required 28 escort carriers and 86 destroyers, an immense force in the context of the theatre and totally contrary to the Allies' global strategy. An 'astounded' Churchill told Mountbatten that his requirements had 'produced a very bad impression.' There would be no 'Buccaneer,' another British failure to honour a commitment.

The Teheran discussions with Stalin centred on the second front in Europe, and made the May 1944 date for 'Overlord' irrevocable. But Teheran also gave Churchill new hope for the war against Japan and provided a decisive fillip for 'Culverin.' Churchill had long looked forward to the entry of the Soviet Union into the war against Japan. Like Turkey in south-east Europe, Russia, not Chiang's China, would be the continental ally that could defeat Japan on land. As early as the 'Trident' Conference (May 1943), Churchill had encapsulated his hopes for the Pacific War in a single sentence: 'The one sure way of

crushing Japan is to persuade Russia to come in against her.'¹⁷ Now at Teheran, Stalin privately told Churchill and Roosevelt that the Soviet Union would enter the war against Japan as soon as Germany were defeated. An elated Churchill hailed 'the momentous declaration,' as well he might. The prospect of Soviet armies in action against Japan eliminated the need for substantial British forces in either the Pacific or Burma.

3. The Sextant Decisions and Their Implications

The collapse of the Bay of Bengal strategy at Cairo left the other alternative for Britain of operations in the South-West Pacific itself. The Combined Chiefs of Staff (i.e., the American Joint Chiefs and the British Chiefs of Staff) reached an understanding at 'Sextant' that a British task force would operate in the Pacific after the summer of 1944. Local supply, including fuel and provisions, would be the responsibility of the United States, especially in the initial phase, but the Royal Navy would still have to meet most logistic needs.¹⁸

Like the Prime Minister, the British Chiefs of Staff were cool to a land war in Burma, but instead of dubious combined operations in the Bay of Bengal with their tricky timetables, they wanted to develop a powerful Anglo-Australian offensive in which the British contribution would be primarily naval. By contrast, 'Culverin' would delay the defeat of Japan. As the COS pointed out in February 1944: 'The naval forces required would be nearly half of the estimated American operational strength in the Pacific.'¹⁹ If Britain supplied the same

fleet to the Pacific, that fleet would comprise a third of American strength by mid-1945, a sizeable contribution, which would be appreciated. If 'Culverin' were mounted, the invasion of Luzon would be delayed until early 1946, and the invasion of Japan till 1947. Pursuing a Pacific strategy, by contrast, would liberate Luzon in the spring of 1945 and permit the invasion of Japan in 1946.

The British Service Chiefs reported that 'Culverin' could not take place until at least six months after the German surrender simply for lack of landing craft. Even assuming that German resistance collapsed by October 1944, the most that the Royal Navy could transfer east were two fleet and seven escort carriers and 13 cruisers. Thus, 'Culverin' could be mounted only if the American supplied landing craft and shipping at the expense of their own Pacific advance. An India-based 'Culverin' and its exploitation into Malaya would bring British forces into Singapore no sooner than by early 1946. Portal, Brooke, and Cunningham wanted something that would bear fruit in 1944, and this meant what came to be known as the 'Middle Strategy'-- combined Anglo-Australian operations in MacArthur's South-West Pacific Command.

Churchill left Cairo unwell and spent much of December 1943 and January 1944 recuperating from pneumonia and a subsequent heart attack in Marrakesh. It was there, to quote Churchill's memoirs: 'that I became aware of how far the British Chiefs of Staff had developed their opinions. I found myself immediately in disagreement, and thus arose the only considerable difference which I and the War Cabinet had with our trusted military colleagues.'²⁰

He minuted his colleagues on 24 January 1944, disclaiming any objection 'to sending the handful of ships proposed to work with the American Fleet....But no plan of war in these theatres could be considered satisfactory which provided no outlet in 1944/45, before Hitler is defeated, for the very large air and military forces we have standing in India and around the Bay of Bengal. For these forces, the only effectual operation is Sumatra.' And so 'Culverin' returned. As for the land war in Burma, despite the decision the previous summer to stop expanding the Indian Army, Churchill sought further reductions.

From Marrakesh, he directed the COS that:

the danger of invasion of India by Japan has passed....there ought to be a continuous reduction in the vast mass of low-grade troops now maintained under arms in India. Nearly two million men are on our pay-lists....The Viceroy [Wavell] and General Auchinleck should be instructed to reduce the numbers by at least half a million during the course of the present year. In this process...the greatest care should be taken to improve the quality of the remaining units and to rely as much as possible upon the martial races. An effort should be made to get back to the high efficiency and standard of the pre-war Indian Army....The standards of recruiting should everywhere be stiffened, and the intake

reduced to the limits of the really trustworthy fighting recruits.²¹

Churchill had not been surprised by reading the Combined Chiefs of Staff's appreciation that he and Roosevelt had so casually initialled at Cairo. In the aftermath of the Cairo Conference, he had never stopped fighting for 'Culverin.' He had not hesitated to undercut agreed upon policies. Early in January 1944, even after the Combined Chiefs of Staff had turned down 'Culverin' at 'Sextant,' Churchill exhorted Mountbatten to persevere: 'The main thing for you to concentrate on is...CULVERIN after the monsoon. This, I am determined to press to the utmost, day in day out...Here is your great chance. Do not allow anything to take your eye off it. Here alone will you have the opportunity of organizing new fields in the world war, and here alone in the amphibious sphere will you have my aid.'²² Accordingly, Mountbatten organized a special delegation in January under his American Chief of Staff, General Albert C. Wedemeyer, to travel to London and Washington in February and March to try to sell 'Culverin.'

In anticipation of the 'Axiom' mission (as it was known), Churchill sought additional backing for his conception. Earlier in the war, Churchill had chartered the Joint Planning Staff to be an alternative source of military staff work that would allow him to obtain advice independent of that vetted by the COS.²³ However, the Joint Planners warned that: 'it may not be possible to limit our commitment in Sumatra and that we may be forced to undertake extensive operations in order to maintain our position there.' If anything,

'Culverin' would postpone a host of operations previously sanctioned by the Allies:

- i) the build up of a Pacific fleet until the spring of 1945.
- ii) the opening of a sea route to China.
- iii) a fleet action with the Japanese and increase the danger of the Japanese concentrating their forces to defeat the Americans.
- iv) the Central Pacific offensive, which the British might otherwise be able to assist.
- v) the date at which the British might operate in support of the Russians in the North Pacific.

In short, Britain could mount 'Culverin' or send a fleet to the Pacific; she could not do both.²⁴

Beginning in February 1944, main units of the Japanese Combined Fleet began to appear in Singapore. By late February, seven battleships, two fleet carriers, and eight cruisers were present at the former British fleet base. Churchill and the COS each interpreted the arrival of these heavy ships according to their own preconceptions. To Churchill, their presence at Singapore ruled out the 'Middle Strategy.' To the Chiefs of Staff, they ruled out 'Culverin.'

* * *

The 'Axiom' Mission, which reached London in late February, recommended urged that the SEAC mission be redefined along Churchillian lines, as merely 'to contain the enemy in Burma,' and also to conduct amphibious attacks, mainly on northern Sumatra by November 1944. The 'Axiom' Mission estimated that 'Culverin' required

no forces from outside SEAC and only a temporary loan of landing craft, shipping, and air cover from Europe. Still, the bill was considerable, and it revealed the weaknesses of the Churchill-Mountbatten strategy. Excluding the covering force, i.e., the Eastern Fleet which was to deal with Japanese heavy ships, the additional naval units needed to establish the British on the tip of Sumatra amounted to four fleet carriers, 22 escort carriers, 23 cruisers, 65 destroyers, and 22 other escorts. The amphibious lift would require 142 cargo ships and more than 1000 specialized landing craft.²⁵ The benefits claimed for 'Culverin' even by its champions were long-term at best. At most, landing on northern Sumatra would enable the RAF to bomb Japanese shipping in the Gulf of Siam and South China Sea and would thus neutralize the ports of Bangkok, Singapore, and Saigon. From northern Sumatra, the RAF could also bomb the big Palembang oilfields in southern Sumatra.²⁶

These strategic justifications had been relevant a year earlier, but by early 1944 events were beginning to overtake them as the twin American advances in the Central and South Pacific gathered momentum. The difficulty for 'Culverin' was that only if it were pushed back to March 1945, virtually the end of the accepted campaigning season in SEAC, would most of the necessary fleet auxiliaries be ready, and then only if plans for the conversion of the ships from civilian to military uses were approved without delay.²⁷ Despite these caveats, the War Cabinet endorsed these recommendations of the 'Axiom' mission. The COS remained opposed. It remained for the United States to speak.

Churchill maintained that no decisions should be taken until the American attitude was clarified. Considerations of grand strategy mattered much, but so did misapprehensions about the postwar world. His opposition to a British fleet in the Pacific was visceral. 'It was not a nice prospect,' he told the sceptical COS in February 1944, 'for us to tail along at the heels of the American fleet and when great victories have been won, to be told that all the credit was due to U.S. forces.'²⁸ More to the point, Churchill worried that if the British Fleet acted as 'a subsidiary force under the Americans in the Pacific,' it would strengthen the American view that all of the East Indies-- including Malaya--might be placed under some international body. This world organization, he feared, would be dominated by the United States.²⁹ Better to have no central role in the war against Japan than to suffer such humiliation. On this point, Churchill received powerful support in his battle for 'Culverin' from the Foreign Office and Eden. The Foreign Office saw the Service Chiefs as having surrendered to the American 'Nimitz-MacArthur-Stilwell' strategy, 'a strategy calculated to eliminate us from the Far Eastern scene,' as one official attached to SEAC put it.³⁰ The Tory members of the War Cabinet, especially Eden, loyally backed their leader. So did Clement Attlee, who in March sounded almost Churchillian in criticizing the 'Middle Strategy' for having little effect on Britain's reputation among subject peoples compared with 'Culverin.' 'It was in MALAYA, BORNEO, and the NETHERLANDS EAST INDIES that our reputation had suffered, and it was there that the world would expect to see it rehabilitated,' the Deputy Prime Minister contended.³¹

The COS were not oblivious to political issues. They recognized that the Pacific War was primarily an American conflict, but they wanted Britain to be in on the mortal thrust at Japan. The COS, who were in regular contact with their American opposite numbers, came to share their outlook in a way that Churchill never did. In inter-Allied conferences, they had regularly endorsed Admiral King's view that the main axis of advance against Japan had to be in the Central Pacific. With Italy defeated, they wanted Britain to contribute. Although Allied strategic decisions had favoured the Central Pacific, they knew that substantial sentiment remained for MacArthur's strategy of an advance through New Guinea to liberate the Philippines from the south. The political case for the 'Middle Strategy' was that as the British and Commonwealth contribution in the South-West Pacific waxed, as it would after Germany's defeat, British influence would grow. The Service Chiefs believed that the 'Middle Strategy' would eventually lead to a British commander replacing MacArthur in the South-West Pacific on the plausible grounds that Commonwealth forces would soon make up the majority of his command.

What put the Prime Minister and the Service Chiefs at loggerheads as much as anything was their readiness to run risks. Churchill did not hesitate to plan things at the margin: shifting landing craft from the Mediterranean to the Bay of Bengal and back again or in attacking an enemy of unknown strength. Nor did Churchill attach as much weight to logistic support as the professional military. He tended to think of military power as warships and divisions, easily understood pieces on the military chessboard. Supporting major operations in remote

theatres with poorly developed ports and communications was a detail that he left to others. The COS remained sceptical of 'Culverin' because they lacked intelligence on Japanese defences in Malaya and Sumatra. They knew approximately what formations were present but not in what strength. Because the Arakan Coast and the Andamans remained in Japanese hands the British could not fly aerial reconnaissances over the region. Although the COS tactfully never referred to the sad story of 'Force Z' or the loss of Singapore, those examples could not have been far from their minds. Nor could any senior military man have been unmindful of Gallipoli. Brooke recorded how these discussions went:

I am quite exhausted after seven-and-a-half hours with Winston to-day, and most of that time engaged in heavy argument....At 12 noon the Chiefs of Staff met the P.M. and were kept till 1.45 p.m. He was still insisting on doing the North Sumatra operation and would not discuss any other. I had a series of heated discussions with him. Then a hurried lunch and at 3 p.m. we met again. This time he had packed the house against us, and was accompanied by Anthony Eden, Oliver Lyttelton and Attlee, in addition the whole of Dickie Mountbatten's Army, Naval and Air Force officers. The whole party were against the Chiefs of Staff...We argued from 3 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. I got very heated at times. Winston pretended that this

was all a frame-up against his pet Sumatra operation and almost took it as a personal matterAt 10 p.m. another C.O.S. meeting which lasted till 12 midnight. P.M. in much more reasonable mood, and I think that a great deal of what we have been doing has soaked in. I hope so at least.³²

Roosevelt, however, wrote to Churchill on 24 February 1944 that he was 'gravely concerned over the recent trends in strategy that favor an operation toward Sumatra and Malaya in the future rather than...[upper] Burma. I fail to see how an operation against Sumatra and Malaya, requiring tremendous resources and forces, can possibly be mounted until after the conclusion of the war in Europe.' In reply, Churchill disingenuously assured the President that 'nothing will be withdrawn or withheld from the operations in North Burma for the sake of CULVERIN.'³³

By early March, the depths of disagreement between the British Service Chiefs and the Prime Minister had become obvious. Ismay warned Churchill on 4 March that 'we are faced with the practical certainty of continued cleavage of opinion between the War Cabinet and their military advisers; nor can we exclude the possibility of resignations on the part of the latter. A breach of this kind, undesirable at any time, would be little short of catastrophic at the present juncture'³⁴--three months before D-Day.

The COS had always claimed that the 'Middle Strategy' was an integral part of American operations. Churchill sought to get round

this claim by writing privately to Roosevelt on 10 March, asking 'whether there is any specific American operation in the Pacific

A) Before the end of 1944 or

B) Before the summer of 1945

which would be hindered or prevented by the absence of a British Fleet detachment?' Basing the British fleet in the Bay of Bengal, Churchill craftily pursued, would 'detain the Japanese Fleet or a large portion of it at Singapore and thus secure you a clear field in the Pacific...'³⁵

Roosevelt answered as Churchill had hinted, admitting that no American operations would be affected by the absence of British units. He now agreed with Churchill that the British fleet would best serve in the Indian Ocean.³⁶ Churchill immediately drafted a paper that he circulated to each of the COS, ordering them to accept the 'Bay of Bengal' strategy. The Service Chiefs discussed Churchill's diktat on 21 March.

On the same day they received a powerful reinforcement from their American counterparts, who rejected the 'Axiom' mission and refused to allocate either shipping or landing craft for 'Culverin.' Churchill had been so intent on guiding Roosevelt that he mistook a tactful silence on 'Culverin' for tacit approval. Accustomed to getting his way with Roosevelt, he had read into Roosevelt's words what he wanted to read without asking frankly what the American opinion of 'Culverin' was. He now received it--again.

But the Service Chiefs had not won. Churchill had had a better case in opposing the 'Middle Strategy' than might at first be

apparent. As the British had no fleet base in the Pacific, the question of what the British Fleet should do against Japan was inextricably mixed with the question whether it could operate in the Pacific. Two basing alternatives existed, India and Australia, but the choice depended on strategy. Basing the Fleet in India, i.e., Colombo and Trincomalee in Ceylon, precluded operations in the Pacific, and by default was a choice for 'Culverin.' The Australian alternative was best suited if the British fleet were to fight in the anticipated decisive battle in the Philippines. Yet India was within 1500 miles of Sumatra, but the principal Australian ports were between 3,000 and 4,000 miles from Java, the probable scene of initial British involvement if the 'Middle Strategy' were followed. Relatively speaking, basing the same forces in Australia as those required by 'Culverin' would cost a third more in shipping.³⁷ But as Brooke put it, Australia's biggest assets as a base were her skilled dockyard labour force, her equable climate, and the fact that: 'Australia is a Dominion with a white population and...is already organized for war, [which] offers obvious advantages over an oriental country which is inherently slow to co-operate.'³⁸

In view of the uncertainty over basing, the COS and Churchill agreed to withhold a decision on strategy until a British naval mission had visited India and Australia, investigated their resources, and reported on to what extent each could support sustained operations. For the next four months, they turned their attention to 'Overlord.' Nonetheless, Churchill thought that he had won the toss. He privately reassured Mountbatten on 18 March that: 'I am myself

working with the Joint Planners week by week on CULVERIN and its variants. I remain entirely opposed to shifting the British centre of gravity against Japan from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific.³⁹

3. Reluctant Warriors: 'Culverin' Again

Meanwhile, events in northern Burma overtook the planners, as the Japanese went on the offensive in early March 1944. As it became evident, the Japanese attack was no diversion but a full-fledged offensive that locked the 14th Army in desperate fighting at Kohima and Imphal, which did not end until July 1944. The Japanese had at last produced what Churchill most feared--a sustained ground campaign in northern Burma.

With the direction of the American advance now resolved upon as the Central Pacific, 'Culverin' appeared by the spring of 1944 as a purely British Empire-centred operation and at best peripheral to the main war effort. Throughout 1943, Churchill had plausibly contended that 'Culverin' would assist the American advance and that by 1945 the two Allied fleets would be in action together. The American timetable adopted in May 1944 stipulated that operations in the summer of 1945 would be against Luzon in the Philippines and against Formosa, whose capture would sever the lines of communication linking Japan with her Southern Area. This timetable was important, for it meant that the Americans would have removed the strategic rationale for 'Culverin' six months before it could at the earliest be mounted. Churchill did not understand the American reluctance to support 'Culverin.' Ordinarily, he contained his resentments, but occasionally the hurt bubbled forth. 'The American method of trying to force particular

policies by the withholding or giving of...airplanes or LSTs [Landing Ship Tank] in theatres where the command belongs by right of overwhelming numbers to us, must be objected to at the right time and strongly protested against.'⁴⁰

Previously, Churchill had stood firm against the COS because he had the support of his civilian colleagues on the War Cabinet and the most important departments of state. But by early May, a consensus emerged among senior Foreign Office officials concerned with the Far East that the 'Middle Strategy' was preferable to 'Culverin,' since the latter could not be mounted for another year. To postpone operations that long meant opting out of the Pacific War at the moment that the American advanced gathered momentum and raised the question of whether the British public would still support a major war effort for little apparent reason.⁴¹ Previously a staunch supporter of Churchill, Eden began to support the Middle Strategy, 'a distinctly British effort.' The Foreign Secretary had become more sensitive than earlier to the American apprehensions that Britain was pursuing a policy of benefit only to her Imperial interests. The 'Middle Strategy,' by contrast, involved Britain in the main American war effort--at least in the spring of 1944--and it helped liberate British territory.⁴² But the Prime Minister disagreed sharply: 'Rangoon and Singapore are great names in the British eastern world, and it will be an ill day for Britain if the War ends without our having made a stroke to regain these places and having let the whole Malay peninsula down until it is eventually evacuated as the result of an American-dictated peace at Tokio....'⁴³

4. The Middle Strategy Rejected

The same drawbacks as beset 'Culverin,' mutatis mutandis, applied to the 'Middle Strategy.' Large-scale combined operations could not begin anywhere till early 1945, far too late to affect the outcome of the main battles to the north. Nor could a combined advance beyond Borneo take place until late 1945 or early 1946. As a contribution to the final phase of the war, the 'Middle Strategy,' began to look more like a non-starter. 'The time and effort involved would be particularly costly, due to the restricted nature of the waters throughout the whole route [within easy range of shore-based aircraft], which would be unfavourable for the operation of aircraft carriers and would involve heavy mine-sweeping and patrol commitments,' the COS concluded in May.⁴⁴

Instead, the Service Chiefs now inclined more towards a fourth alternative, that of concentrating most Royal Navy forces in the Pacific, where they would join the U.S. Navy. Only a residuum of British ships would remain in the Indian Ocean for defence, trade protection, and raiding. The 'Pacific Strategy' possessed advantages that neither the 'Middle Strategy' nor 'Culverin' enjoyed. It did not depend upon Germany's defeat. Naval forces were available, and more would become available soon, since the European theatre was now a ground campaign. Unlike the amphibious operations previously debated, its demands on shipping were modest--tankers apart. Nor did the Pacific Strategy suffer from the feared logistical problems, since a British task force by itself could use existing facilities in eastern

Australia or even share American intermediate bases closer to the fighting.

Churchill remained opposed. He reiterated his old claim 'Culverin' would employ British Indian Army divisions, which would otherwise lie idle, palpably untrue as the fighting at Kohima-Imphal approached its climax. Much to the dismay of the Service Chiefs, Churchill directed in July that 'Culverin' be resurrected for discussion as the upcoming Second Quebec Conference, 'Octagon.' He had worried whether the invasion of Normandy would succeed, and events had now answered those fears. Consequently, he felt even more strongly that combined operations could succeed in South-East Asia. And so the discussions that had lapsed in March resumed with a vengeance.

Cunningham has recounted how many Defence Committee meetings went. In a particularly strained encounter, he had several blow-ups with Churchill, spending three hours (2200 to 0145 on 6/7 July 1944) listening to the Prime Minister 'talking mostly nonsense.' Relations between Churchill and the Chiefs of Staff--the success of 'Overlord' notwithstanding--reached their nadir that summer. The Prime Minister was frequently depressed, which made him irritable and sarcastic to his colleagues. Still, the exasperated First Sea Lord reflected: 'The attitude of mind of the politicians about this question is astonishing. They are obviously frightened of the Americans laying down the law as to what is to happen when Japan is defeated to the various islands, ports and other territories. This appears to be quite likely if the Americans are left to fight Japan by themselves.'

But they will not lift a finger to get a force into the Pacific. They prefer to hang about the outside and recapture our own rubber trees.⁴⁵ In August, a bitter Cunningham echoed Brooke after another enervating meeting with Churchill:

No decisions were reached, in fact a thoroughly wasted day. What a drag on the wheel of war this man is. Everything is centralized in him with consequent indecision and waste of time before anything gets done. Messages to US Chiefs of Staff drafted this morning come back after lunch as amended by the P.M. As usual full of inaccuracies, hot air and political points. Not the sort of business like messages we should send to our opposite numbers.⁴⁶

Even as these meetings dragged on in the Cabinet War Rooms beneath Whitehall, events in the Central Pacific weakened Churchill's resistance. The American landing on Saipan in the Mariana Islands on 15 June forced the Japanese hand. The resulting Battle of the Philippine Sea (15-19 June 1944) cost the IJN two fleet carriers and virtually the entire air complement of the Combined Fleet. As a result, the Americans swiftly accelerated all their plans. They aimed now to land on Formosa early in 1945, where the long-awaited Pacific Jutland was thought likely. Other talk, Brooke told Churchill in July, emphasized by-passing Formosa entire and going straight for Kyushu, the southernmost island of Japan. By July 1944, the Indian Army had

at last proved itself in Burma. These developments made the 'Middle Strategy' otiose. With the Pacific War stalemate now broken, Churchill began to appreciate the value of joint operations in the Pacific alongside the United States. If Britain were to share in the victory, she had to achieve results with the means at hand.

An additional factor, rarely alluded to, was the deteriorating state of Anglo-American relations in 1944.⁴⁷ With Russophilia at its wartime peak, official Washington spoke increasingly of 'emerging nations' and nations whose greatness lay behind them. There was little doubt which allies were meant. Then, too, there was Britain's financial dependence upon the United States. As victory loomed, so did the prospect that American economic aid might abruptly end. A British fleet serving with the American in the Pacific testified the postwar British partnership in a world order overseen by the English-speaking peoples. And a British battle fleet in the Pacific also demonstrated Britain's determination to maintain her stake in Asia.

In mid-July, Imsay first formulated a modus vivendi between the two previously irreconcilable strategies. Perhaps, he suggested, the Bay of Bengal strategy could be recast for an amphibious landing to capture Rangoon, which would divert Japanese forces from the northern front. That portion of the Eastern Fleet not required, could be offered for MacArthur's South-West Pacific.⁴⁸ Adamant as ever against a ground offensive

in northern Burma, Churchill acknowledged the value of the Rangoon operation. Code-named 'Vanguard,' it had the merit of returning 'one of our capital cities and should further our advance on to the Malay Peninsula.'⁴⁹ 'Vanguard' also could be mounted with forces already in India. Unlike 'Culverin,' 'Vanguard' could be presented to the United States as benefitting the Chinese. Thus, it was sure to win American favour--and landing craft and shipping. Shipping remained very tight, and 'Overlord' consumed much more than originally forecast.⁵⁰ Churchill was dismayed to learn from Mountbatten, back in London for consultations in early August 1944, that even 'Vanguard' could not be mounted before the spring of 1945. A humbled Churchill confessed that if even this modest combined operation could not be mounted from India prior to November 1945, then the COS had indeed been right to oppose 'Culverin.' 'Vanguard' required only inshore support that could be provided by assault carriers and elderly battleships, so it would free the more modern naval units to form a British Empire task force in the South-West Pacific.

The COS noted that once British forces were established in the South-West Pacific, they could easily fight alongside the U.S. Navy in the Central Pacific. And Churchill consented, although reiterating that 'Culverin' remained his heart's desire. The members of the Defence Committee thereupon agreed that if Germany collapsed abruptly in the autumn of 1944 (as was expected until the failure at Arnhem in September 1944), 'Culverin' would

be mounted immediately rather than 'Vanguard' in March 1945.⁵¹ Thus hoping to get his way at last, Churchill agreed to offer 'a great naval force to support their [the Americans'] operations against Formosa or Japan. Should they refuse such an offer, we should consider intermediate plans for the employment of the fleet, perhaps in support of General MacArthur. A refusal of our offer by the Americans would be of enormous value as a bulwark against any accusation that we had not backed them up in the war against Japan.' The jaundiced Cunningham saw through Churchill: 'He wants to be able to have on record that the US refused the assistance of the British Fleet in the Pacific. He will be bitterly disappointed if they don't refuse.'⁵²

Despite the apparent agreement over the Navy's role in the Pacific, the mistrust was too deepseated to disappear. Churchill and the Service Chiefs continued to wrangle as they crossed the Atlantic to the Second Quebec Conference, code-named 'Octagon.' Churchill remained unrepentant, confirming Cunningham's hunch. He informed MacArthur's British liaison officer, General Herbert Lumsden, on the eve of 'Octagon' that, although the British had offered their fleet for the main operations against Japan, 'I have my own ideas about a campaign across the Indian Ocean.'⁵³ As the Queen Mary approached Halifax, Churchill burst out: 'Here we are within 72 hours of meeting the Americans and there is not a single point that we are in agreement over.'

Churchill was right to think that the Americans might not want to have the British Fleet alongside them. But that was

because in losing Singapore, the Royal Navy had lost the one fleet base east of Suez that could have supported fleet operations in the Pacific. After 1942, any British naval role in the Pacific depended on American supply, always a limited quantity. The larger the British Fleet in the Pacific, the fewer American ships that could be supplied. Up till the eve of 'Octagon,' the American Service Chiefs had opposed any British participation in the Central Pacific, endorsing instead a British Empire Task Force in MacArthur's South-West Pacific area, which would require less American support and which could more easily be supplied from Australia.⁵⁴

However, unknown to Churchill, the project of putting the British Pacific Fleet in the South-West Pacific foundered on the opposition of its supposed beneficiary, General Douglas MacArthur. MacArthur recognized that the British wished to push the boundaries of SEAC to the east, necessarily at the expense of his own command. He informed the JCS on 27 August that he did not want a separate British Empire Task Force, 'merely an opening wedge to achieve the object of a separate British theater.'⁵⁵ As a result, the American Service Chiefs abruptly reversed themselves on the eve of the Second Quebec conference and said that they wanted the British fleet in the main operations against Japan. Churchill learned of this on 11 September, when at Quebec he met with Roosevelt's chief of staff, Admiral William Leahy, who confirmed that the fleet would be welcomed in the main operations.

Since the British role in the Pacific would now be purely naval, Churchill scented the chance for a major amphibious attack in the Bay of Bengal, perhaps even on Singapore, 'the supreme British objective in the whole of the Indian and Far Eastern theatres.'⁵⁶ Such were the mental reservations behind the famous colloquy between the two world leaders. On 13 September, the 'Octagon' conference convened at the Chateau Frontenac in Quebec. Roosevelt appeared to settle the whole matter at the first session, when he responded to Churchill's offer of 'the British Main Fleet to take part in the main operations against Japan under United States Supreme Command' by affirming that the British fleet was 'no sooner offered than accepted.' Having made the offer, Churchill proceeded immediately to qualify it by reaffirming his undiminished faith in 'Culverin.' Resuming his remarks after Roosevelt's interjection, he told the conference (in the words of the minutes) that:

He had always advocated an advance across the Bay of Bengal and operations to recover Singapore, the loss of which had been a grievous and shameful blow to British prestige which must be avenged. It would not be good enough for Singapore to be returned to us at the peace table. We should recover it in battle. These operations would not debar the employment of small British Empire component's with United States forces in the Pacific.⁵⁷

On receiving a COS minute the next day recording the American Service Chiefs' agreement to a British fleet participating in the Pacific, Churchill wrote 'No,' and had to be reminded that he had just agreed to it. As the tactful Ismay said of the agreement, 'the Chiefs of Staff feel that it would be very difficult to go right back on it.'⁵⁸

5. Conclusion: 'a typical Winston project'

How are we to understand Churchill's great aversion to fighting in the Pacific and his seeming obsession with 'Culverin,' this expedition to land in the Dutch East Indies? It was not that Churchill opposed Pacific operations per se so much that he rejected a land offensive in Burma. Fearing the expanded and none too skilful Indian Army that had grown up in wartime, and which had performed poorly in Malaya, Burma, and in Eastern India, Churchill sought a military strategy that did not jeopardize the Indian Empire. Not until the wartime Indian Army had proved its mettle in the spring and summer of 1944 was Churchill ready to contemplate alternate plans. Despite his military philosophizing that sought to justify his actions in the First World War, Churchill was no unblinking proponent of combined operations. He fought hard, long, and in the end successfully against the 'Middle Strategy' of combined operations in the South Pacific. He successfully opposed amphibious attacks on the Arakan Coast throughout 1943. And he hardly supported Operation 'Buccaneer' to retake the Andamans. The trouble with operations on the Arakan Coast were that they entailed simultaneous ground offensives, which Churchill was determined to avoid at nearly any

cost. So did 'Buccaneer,' whose cancellation allowed the British to beg off a projected land campaign in northern Burma. 'Culverin,' by contrast, did not.


We all know that Churchill had not 'become the King's first minister in order to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire.' And we may think that his determination to mount 'Culverin' stemmed from that sentiment. However, the centrepiece of that Empire was never Singapore but was always India. And in India is the reason Churchill wished to land on Sumatra. Because it would be quick, economical of lives, and successful, the landing on Sumatra would not imperil the morale of the Indian Army and risk all the awful consequences that might flow from defeat. The advance down Sumatra toward Singapore would employ the overlarge wartime Indian Army and remove the grave danger to the Raj posed by armed natives.

Churchill clung so resolutely to this scheme after successive rejections by the Americans at the 'Trident,' 'Quadrant,' and 'Sextant' conferences in 1943 for that same reason he went into political exile in the 1930s--to preserve the Indian Empire. After late 1943, he had another, even better reason to avoid a costly ground campaign in Burma. Stalin's promise at Teheran to enter the war as soon as Germany collapsed removed any incentive for offensives more direct than 'Culverin.' The Allies expected Hitler's armies to collapse as speedily as the Kaiser's had in 1918 once they seized the initiative in Europe. So, with the date of D-Day at last set, the war against Japan seemed much less a problem. To one with these

assumptions in mind, combined operations against lightly defended Sumatra seemed both humane and effective.

Trumbull Higgins, who wrote before the 30 Years Rule opened official papers to view, damned Churchill as the 'architect of stalemate.' Since then, Higgins has been correctly revised because he did not appreciate the constraints that supply imposed on the Second Front. On what I have called the 'third front,' supply imposed equally serious limitations, too, which ruled out the ambitious (and mutually incompatible) plans of both Churchill and the Chiefs of Staff. It was one thing to project bold plans to break stalemates that developed on land; it was another to carry through on those plans once detailed staff planning was undertaken. The syndrome of first promising and then having to retract was the same in both theatres. However, in the war against Japan, the British were already locked in a land battle. Churchill's dazzling but politically inspired 'Culverin' was unlikely to have had the intended effect. We know now that the Japanese had few forces in Sumatra and little ability quickly to reinforce those troops. It seems unlikely, too, that they would have bothered. The Japanese little doubted from what direction the greatest threat to their Empire came. As Higgins wrote, 'the least-guarded points...were almost invariably the least important points.'

In his reluctance until late 1944 to hazard the Royal against the Imperial Navy or to risk the Indian against the Japanese Army, Churchill sought to uphold the security of India--the alpha and omega of the British Empire. Ironically, his determination to have the Empire on the cheap testified to its frailty and to its uncertain



position in the postwar world. In the end, his agreement to sending the Royal Navy to fight in the main operations against Japan was a gallant bid to maintain a world role for Britain that the war had shown again and again to be beyond British resources.

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Endnotes:

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4. 'Appreciation of the War against Japan,' Report by the Joint Planning Staff, 7 Mar. 1943, JP (43) 115, CAB 84/53, Pt.I.
5. 'Operations in the Far East,' Aide-Memoire from Ismay to Churchill, 28 Apr. 1943, PREM 3/143/7. These views, including a rejection of 'Anakim' for 1943/44, were formally presented as 'Operations from India, 1943/44,' 14 May 1943, CCS 225.
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10. Penderel Moon, ed. Wavell: The Viceroy's Journal, entry of 24 June 1943, (Oxford, 1973), pp. 3-4.
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13. 'Japanese Strategy and Intentions in South-East Asia Area,' Joint Intelligence Committee memorandum forwarded by Ismay to Churchill, 25 Nov. 1943, PREM 3/232/11.
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17. 'Notes on "Anakim,"' Churchill minute annexed to COS(T) 8, 8 May 1943, PREM 3/443/7.
18. COS (43) 1012(W), 23 Dec. 1943, PREM 3/164/5.
19. 'South-East Asia Command: Future Operations,' 23 Feb. 1944, COS (44) 183(O) Final, PREM 3/160/7.
20. Closing the Ring (Boston), p. 571.
21. Churchill to Gen. H.L. Ismay for Chiefs of Staff, 17 Jan. 1944, reproduced in Closing the Ring, pp. 687-88.
22. Churchill to Mountbatten, 10 Jan. 1944, PREM 3/147/7.
23. Papers dealing with this relationship, formalized in April 1942, are in PREM 3/119/10.
24. 'Plans for the Defeat of Japan,' Report by the Joint Planning Staff, 2 Feb. 1944, JP (44) 32 (FINAL), CAB 84/60.
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38. Brooke remarks at COS mtg., 25 Feb. 1944; 63rd mtg. (44) (O), CAB 79/89.
39. Churchill to Mountbatten, 18 Mar. 1944, PREM 3/160/1.
40. Churchill minute to Ismay, 24 June 1944, PREM 3/160/5.
41. Minutes by Victor Cavendish-Bentinck, 8 May; Nevil Butler, 9 May; and Ashley Clarke, 11 May 1944, FO 371/41797.
42. Eden minute to Churchill, 12 June 1944, PREM 3/160/4.
43. Churchill minute to Ismay, 24 June 1944, PREM 3/160/5.
44. 'War against Japan--Summary of Various Courses,' COS (44) 396 (O), 4 May 1944, PREM 3/160/4.
45. Cunningham diary, 14 July 1944, Cunningham Papers, British Museum, Addl. Mss. 50577.
46. Cunningham diary, 9 Aug. 1944, loc. cit.
47. Christopher Thorne, Allies of a Kind (London, 1978), pp. 274-84 for Anglo-American coolness after the Cairo ('Sextant') Conference, and pp. 387-90 for British dependence on American financing and the effect on strategy.
48. 'Material for a Minute on Far Eastern Strategy,' 15 July 1944, PREM 3/148/9.

49. Churchill minute to Ismay, 5 May 1944, PREM 3/148/9.
50. COS 226th Mtg (O), 10:30 p.m., 8 Aug. 1944, CAB 79/79.
51. COS(W) 243, embodying the conclusions of the Defence Committee meeting, 12 Aug. 1944, PREM 3/160/6.
52. Cunningham diary, 9 Aug. 1944.
53. Churchill to Lumsden, 4 Sept. 1944, CAB 69/6.
54. Minute from British Joint Staff Mission, Washington, D.C., to Octagon, CORDITE 74, 10 Sept. 1944, PREM 3/160/6.
55. Views of MacArthur are from his cable to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 27 Aug. 1944, summarized in Appendix B to JCS, 'British Participation in the War against Japan,' JCS 992/3, 4 Sept. 1944, RG 218.
56. Churchill to Ismay, 12 Sept. 1944, loc. cit.
57. Churchill, Triumph and Tragedy, vi., (London, 1954), pp. 134-35. Foreign Relations of the United States: The Conference at Quebec 1944, (Washington, 1972), 13 Sept. 1944, p. 315 gives a different wording. See also the British minutes of the First Plenary Meeting, 13 Sept. 1944, PREM 3/329/4.
58. Joint Staff Mission to Octagon, CORDITE 74, 10 Sept. 1944, PREM 3/160/6.